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A TRUE ADVENTURE STORY
By CECIL CLARK

TWEAKED RUSSIA'S BEARD

Some of the old sealing fleet in Victoria harbor. Third from left is Mary Ellen, sailed by both Seawolf McLean and George Cessford

McLEAN IS FAMOUS for his extraordinary seafaring adventures, which, no doubt, came to the ears of Jack London.

The McLean brothers were born in Sydney, Cape Breton Island, and Alex sailed the Atlantic for nine years before coming to this coast in 1879 as third mate on the Santa Clara. He steamboated out of Victoria, then became chief officer on the government cutter Sir James Douglas, helping to lay the first marine cable between Vancouver Island and Point Grey.

Then brother Dan, who had been sailing deep water out of New York, came out and spent a good deal of time in the little schooner Flyaway, prospecting for gold and coal up and down the coast. In the fall of 1883 the pair went sealing out of San Francisco in the San Diego, and returned with a good catch. Some say that the next year McLean was skipper of the old Beaver; others say he took the Mary Ellen out sealing. Anyway in 1886 they brought the Triumph out from Halifax. Then Alex partnered up with Bill Spring in the Favorite, which was more or less the start of organized sealing. Pretty soon everyone was scrambling for schooners, and eventually quite a fleet was based in Victoria. They were all of a standard size, about 90 tons, some having Indian crews, some all-white.

With large-scale operations came limitations and prohibitions, mostly from the U.S. government. However, the sealers knew a challenge when they saw one and pretty soon most of them were matching their wits with the "revenooers" around the breeding grounds.

So bold were the McLeans that they were finally ordered out of the Bering Sea by the Russians. But they went back.

On one occasion, in October, 1891, when Alex was skippering the James H. Lewis and Dan had the Kate and Anna they were surprised well inshore by a Russian patrol boat. Dan was just hoisting in his boats when the Russian cutter loomed out of the fog. She gave chase but Dan got away, and the gunboat turned her attention to Alex's boat. Not only turned her attentions but her guns and knocked down some of the Lewis' tophamper.

Alex was ashore at the time, but reached his ship in a hurry, just as the cruiser came alongside. It looked as though the argument was over. Then, as the Russian officers considered their next time, McLean got an idea. They found him busy aft trying to throw a chain over the gunboat's propeller! Hedidn't make it, and got towed in to Petropavlovsk where he did four months in jail.

To cover Alex McLean's subsequent adventures would take a book; such as the time he got involved with the steamer Alexander manned by a bunch of dare-devil adventurers. What they were doing history doesn't relate but we know they picked up a load of arms and ammunition from the sand dunes of Drakes Bay in California and delivered them somewhere.

Next the moustachioed McLean turned up in the schooner Carmencita (which he bought in Acapulco) and with a crew of wild characters set off for Copper Island on the Siberian coast. Landing in front of a Russian blockhouse, he went ashore with a goodwill offering . . . a case of square-face gin! When the guards were all drunk, McLean locked them in their blockhouse, then went ahead and raided the rookeries. Had he been caught, the result would have been rough. In flagrant breaches the Russians had a nasty habit of sentencing their prisoners to Siberian mines.

There's a tale told of a couple of these early-day hard case sealers sentenced to this form of drudgery, who worked below shackled together. Came a falling out between the prisoners, and next day the Russian guard found a grisly exhibit in the hoist . . . a human hand! After that

With Sorensen as trading master they sailed from San Francisco. There are different stories about the Sophia Sutherland's adventures. Some say Sorensen inspired the crew to mutiny, but was forestalled by the alert McLean who promptly marooned the Dane on a deserted island with a barrel of water and his good wishes.

Yellow fever then broke out aboard ship and one by one the crew languished and died; all except McLean, who single-handed brought the schooner to Samoa, 1,500 miles away.

It's a great yarn but it must have happened to somebody else, for when the U.S. Consul from Samoa, William Churchill, passed through Victoria in December, 1897, he had a different story to tell.

Seems that Churchill, on his way to New York to take over the job of editor of the New York Sun, told Victoria newsmen that when the Sophia Sutherland put in to Samoa for supplies, Churchill recognized Sorensen as a crook, and took McLean aside to warn him about the Dane.

Apparently years before, Sorensen, in the ill-famed schooner Albert, was one of the worst "blackbirders" in the south seas. With a cut-throat crew he would invade lonely islands, inveigle natives aboard, get them drunk, then sail off to sell them as cheap labor on distant plantations. It was the era of "Bully" Hayes and his bunch of desperados, and once . . . according to Churchill . . . Sorensen topped the Hayes gang with an exploit.

came, day by day, another hand, a leg and then a head, the sealer's grim intimation that he'd lost confidence in his partner.

McLean was always lucky when it came to dodging gunfire from cutters, although once the man next to him in a dory, Walter York, was killed.

ADVENTURE-SEEKING Alex McLean tried the South Pacific in 1896 when he met up with a Dane called Sorensen. Sorensen had a chart that led to secret south sea treasure, but needed a skipper, a ship and a reliable crew. McLean was skipper, and they fitted out the Tacoma-built schooner Sophia Sutherland, 126 feet long, 148 tons gross, then picked up a crew of carefree adventurers.

He lured a Solomon Islands chief aboard the Albert and held him for ransom. The ransom fee turned out to be half a dozen dusky warriors, whom Sorensen sold to their enemies on a neighboring island . . . to be eaten!

Sorensen's final payoff was in pearls.

When word of this got around island trading posts, the British government decided to lower the boom and sent HMS Dart out to clean up the Polynesian situation. Mr. Sorensen, tried in Sydney, Australia, in 1884, got ten years.

THIRTEEN YEARS LATER he bobbed up again in the South Seas, this time on the deck of the Sophia Sutherland with McLean. Churchill's word of caution put McLean on his guard, and when the Sophia Sutherland later put in to Fiji, the Dane was in irons and promptly bundled ashore. His connection with McLean, however, didn't end there.

When Churchill settled down to his editorial duties in New York, who should turn up one day but Mr. Sorensen, trying to raise money for another South Pacific treasure hunt. Churchill immediately recognized him as the piratical bully of Samoan days and unmasked him in the columns of the Sun. Sorensen retaliated by launching a libel action for $100,000. Charles Dana, the publisher, must have wondered where his editor was heading; maybe Churchill also wondered. However, there were the British admiralty's records, and a man called McLean, who lived in Victoria—a man called McLean who had once clapped Sorensen in irons in mid-Pacific.

McLean was found but there came an insoluble hitch. For his sealing peccadioles in the North Pacific, McLean had been indicted by a U.S. court and didn't care to set foot on U.S. soil. However, he did the next best thing. In Montreal, he gave his evidence by deposition. His knowledge of Sorensen satisfied the U.S. court and with the admiralty's record thrown in for good measure, Sorensen lost his action.

Came the turn of the century when the days of sealing drew to a close. The little vessels that left Victoria every year to spread their white wings from the sub-Arctic to the Monterey Peninsula, now seemed doomed to end their days ranged alongside one another in Victoria's inner harbor. Rising and falling with the tide, they gathered weed and barnacles, their deck seams gaping, their gear chafing and rotting. Ultimately many of them were set on fire.

Alex McLean, the old Seawolf, went over to Vancouver to live (he had a wife and daughter) and just before the outbreak of the First World War he was running a little tug called Favorite around Vancouver's False Creek. Same name as the schooner he and Bill Spring started the sealing industry with, 30 years before.

One night in September, 1914, McLean, now nearing 70, stumbled on the gangway boarding his tug at the foot of Union Street, and fell into the water. He must have struck his head on a fender log for there was a nasty gash on his forehead when they picked his body out of the inlet a few days later. It seemed as though the only part of the burial service his fictional counterpart couldn't remember had come round full cycle—". . . and the body shall be cast in the sea."

As I said at the beginning, there are now only a handful of the old sealers left; but thanks to George and Nellie Cessford, down at Kiwanis Village, for a fascinating hour or so I dropped back in time to the days of Seawolf McLean.